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ABSTRACT

Issues unique to survey research among limited-English-proficient (LEP) populations are discussed, with illustrations drawn from one recent doctoral study. The research in question was on language, culture, and ethnicity in five Chinese-language schools in northern California. Its aim was to investigate the role of the schools in maintaining Chinese language, culture, and ethnicity in a multilingual/multicultural society. The survey of 800 administrators, teachers, parents, and students was carried out by questionnaire, provided in both English and Chinese versions (students' were in English only). Data for this analysis are drawn from the survey of one of the five schools. In developing the questionnaire, these issues were encountered and addressed: writing translatable English; maintaining the original meaning in the translation; significant cultural issues; and reconciling differences and similarities in English and Chinese responses. Each is discussed, and interpretations of and resolutions to specific problems in the survey are examined. It is concluded that as U.S. demographics change, it is increasingly important to gain some understanding of issues in surveying LEP populations. (MSE)

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Surveying LEP Populations: Issues Explored through an Example

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Introduction

In spite of the fact that the survey research method has probably been considered the most widely used method of social research (Marsh, 1982), few studies have been conducted on surveying limited English proficiency (LEP) populations. As the society becomes more and more diversified linguistically and culturally, and more and more language minority students enter the U.S. public schools, more research is needed in this area. The purpose of this paper is to address issues encountered in surveying language minority populations. Data collected in the investigator's doctoral research are used to illustrate some of the issues. Suggestions for conducting cross-cultural research and recommendations for future research are offered.

The investigator's doctoral research was on language, culture and ethnicity in Chinese language schools in Northern California. The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of Chinese language schools in maintaining the Chinese language, culture and ethnicity in a multilingual / multicultural society. The sample in the study included five Chinese schools with a total of 800 principals, teachers, parents and students. The survey research method was used. Observations were also conducted. Instruments used in the study included questionnaires for principals, teachers, parents and students. All questionnaires were provided in both English and Chinese versions except students' questionnaires, which were in English only. This paper uses one of the

five schools as an example because of its more balanced responses to both English and Chinese questionnaires.

Background

Searches of the ERIC, the Public Opinion Quarterly and other relevant sources revealed very little about issues in surveying LEP populations. However, some general information on survey research and cross-cultural studies has been identified in the literature that is relevant to issues discussed in this paper.

The questionnaire and individual interview have been regarded as the most common instruments for data collection in survey research (Borg & Gall, 1989). While designing a questionnaire in two languages and interviewing individuals from an ethnic minority culture, in addition to considering general concerns such as the type of questions being asked, specific questions to ask and how to ask them (Berdie, Anderson & Niebuhr, 1986), factors such as the language usage in the source language, the translation process, and cultural differences are of crucial importance (Parker, 1977). Goode and Hatt (1962) argued that "the formulation of good questions is a much more subtle and frustrating task than is generally believed by those who have not actually attempted it" (pp.132). However, it is even more subtle and frustrating to convey one message in two languages. This is particularly true when, more often than not, the influence of cultural differences is inevitable in the process of translating the source questionnaire into the target language since some concepts exist in one language, but not in the other.

While discussing the process of developing the source questionnaire, Brisling, Lonner and Thorndike (1973) argue that writing translatable English and wording questions properly are two important elements in the translating process because it is difficult for a bilingual to translate poorly written passages and poorly worded questions into another language. They strongly recommend techniques such as using short and simple sentences, using specific terms, adding context to difficult terms, and decentering in doing translation.

According to Brisling, Lonner and Thorndike (1973), decentering is a translation process in which "the source and the target language versions are equally important and open to modification during the translation procedure." Thus, the first version of questions in the source questionnaire is very likely to be changed before an adequate translation becomes possible.

Back-translation is another issue frequently discussed in conducting cross-cultural studies. It involves the retranslation of the initial target language version into the source language, and requires the involvement of more human resources. Parker (1977), Brisling, Lonner and Thorndike (1973) and Nida (1986) recommend back-translation for best translation results.

Nida (1986) particularly discussed the concept of equivalence, arguing that translating means translating meaning. It is the content rather than the actual number of words that conveys the meaning.

Issues Explored

This paper addresses the following issues:

1. Writing translatable English
2. Maintaining the original meaning in the translation
3. Encountering cultural issues
4. Reconciling differences and similarities between English and Chinese responses

The investigator developed all questionnaires in English first and then translated them into Chinese. The majority of the questions were items that required multiple choice responses, rank-order responses, dichotomous questions, checklists, and Likert scales. There was an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire where respondents were asked to comment on any issues related to Chinese schools. Pilot tests of the English questionnaires were conducted and revisions were made accordingly.

Writing translatable English

Because I am fluent in both English and Chinese and was a translator before, I translated all questionnaires by myself since I felt that I had more insights into problems involved in the translation process. While developing the English questionnaire, I made an effort to avoid messages that might cause confusion in the future translation. Purposefully, I used short and simple sentences, employed active rather than passive voice, asked questions as specific as possible, put difficult concepts into context, and avoided colloquialism. For example, one

question asked principals to identify goals of the Chinese school. One of the original choices was that the Chinese school served as a place for "social gatherings." Noticing the vagueness of the term "social gathering," I revised it to "being with friends and making new friends."

Another issue in translation involves the use of terminology. Since respondents may come from different walks of life, terms such as "language maintenance" and "cultural maintenance" might appear too academic. Such terminologies were avoided deliberately. Simple English was used instead. As a result, the translation became easier.

Maintaining the original meaning in the translation

Since the major purpose of translation was to communicate the same message in the second language as in the original one, ensuring the congruence of the English and Chinese questionnaires was crucial. Doing so involved translating, back-translating and interpreting feedbacks from experts in the field as well as others who were bilinguals.

As discussed earlier, translating means translating meaning. Thus, in producing a functionally equivalent translation, decentering is a very important technique. Since both the source and the target versions are open for revision in the process of translation, both versions contribute to the formation of the final questionnaires. One example of decentering was the writing of the parents' questionnaire. One question asked parents for their reasons of sending their children to the Chinese school. They were provided with a list of choices. One of the original choices was to "maintain ethnicity." I realized that in the Chinese language, there was

no equivalent for the word "ethnicity." I therefore changed "maintain ethnicity" to "maintain ethnic identity" and translated it into Chinese. A bilingual person was invited to back-translate the Chinese version. The back-translated English version reads "to feel proud of yourself and self-worth." On the basis of such translating and back-translating, the final question became "feeling proud of being who they are and increase their self-esteem." In this study, however, back-translation was used only in places where I felt that the translation into Chinese was difficult.

The use of equivalent in doing translation is suggested by some researchers. One example of using the closest equivalent was in translating the sentence "the teacher was committed" - a typical English expression, but hard to put into Chinese. With the help of bilinguals, a Chinese equivalent was identified for the term "committed." Thus, the message was reproduced without changing the meaning, even though the translation was not word for word.

Encountering cultural issues

Cultural differences affected how participants responded to the survey. Tremendous differences in their attitudes towards doing this research were observed across the schools. Some respondents were very receptive of me. They even displayed great enthusiasm for the study. The reluctance of others was difficult to overcome. Considering that such differences might affect the result of the interview, I conducted informal interviews with parents, teachers and students in order to get

some general information about the Chinese schools. One experience was that the more I got involved with them, the more they would open up to my questions and be receptive of me. I made an effort to get involved with the school as much as I could, and to know principals, teachers, parents and students as much as possible. I attended their activities whenever I had a chance. As a result, I was more accepted by them, and they were more willing to tell me information they knew about the schools.

My experience with parents was particularly worth mentioning. I noticed that at the beginning of my research, whenever I wanted to talk to them about Chinese school related issues, they would refer me to either the principal or teachers. Later, I realized that in the Chinese culture, the school and teachers were considered the absolute authority that should be responsible for everything that happens in the school, from making curriculum decision to students discipline problems. In order to obtain different perspectives from different groups of participants, mutual understanding and respect are important

Feedback offers specific suggestions. Three former Chinese school principals who were not only knowledgeable of the field, but also fluent bilinguals reviewed all questionnaires in both English and Chinese versions and provided valuable advice. For example, originally, there was a question in the parents' questionnaire that asked parents to indicate their socio-economic status. Parents were asked to identify the range of their family income. All three principals felt that this question was

inappropriate. First of all, the concept of socio-economic status does not exist in Chinese. Second, questions of this nature are considered too intruding in the Chinese culture. The concern was that parents might be offended and even refuse to do the survey. As an alternative, some general information on socio-economic status in certain geographical areas was obtained from the local library.

Reconciling differences and similarities between English and Chinese responses

Fifty five parents from School A who returned their questionnaires had been given the opportunity to choose either the Chinese questionnaire or the English one. Thirty two of them completed the Chinese version whereas the other twenty three chose to respond in English. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were utilized in order to decide whether the Chinese translation of the questionnaire was congruent with the English version. The level of statistical significance was set at .05.

Similarities were found in both the English and Chinese responses in most of the cases, even though there seemed to have a pattern that responses in Chinese were more positive than the English responses. Parents seemed to have a homogeneous view that the emphasis in Chinese language instruction should be on listening and speaking, and they expressed general satisfaction with the Chinese school. However, significant differences were found between English and Chinese responses in certain areas. For example, significant differences were found in the degree to which parents participated in

activities organized by the Chinese school. Parents' responses in Chinese indicated that they talked more with school personnel, observed classes more often, worked more frequently as volunteers, and discused Chinese school related issues with their children more often than parents who chose to respond in English. Significant differences were also found in the attitudes towards the Chinese language and culture instruction. Parents who responded in Chinese thought that instruction in Chinese language and culture was more successful than parents who responded in English. Parents who responded in Chinese also agreed more with the statement that the Chinese school provided many activities for meaningful interaction among children, parents, and teachers.

After a close scrutiny of these differences, it probably can be concluded that it is unlikely that the translation has caused these differences. A more reasonable explanation might be that responses in Chinese were more positive than responses in English because the participants felt more comfortable with the Chinese language. Therefore, they were more involved in the Chinese school and more interested in Chinese school related activities. Because of their proficiency in the Chinese language, they were able to help their children more and were in a better position to judge the Chinese language and culture instruction.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the above example of surveying LEP population at one school, the following suggestions and recommendations are offered.

1. While developing the original questionnaire, the researcher should consider not only the wording of the questionnaire, but also socio-cultural factors that might affect the response.

2. In order to make the translation of the questionnaire congruent with the original, easily translatable questionnaires should be developed. Both versions of the questionnaires should be pilot tested.

3. The complete questionnaire should be back translated. To assure maximum accuracy, it is far from enough to have only one bilingual person to do the translation.

4. Translators and interviewers need professional training. The fact that a person is bilingual does not mean that he/she is sensitive to the relevant issues involved in cross-cultural research.

5. Researchers should not only be sensitive to the unique characteristics of the LEP populations surveyed, but also be aware of the contrasting cultural values that might affect the survey result. To reach maximum understanding, they should become involved with the particular population surveyed and participate in their activities as much as possible.

6. Discrepancies in responses in different languages should be further studied in order to precisely determine reasons that caused these differences.

7. More research is needed to determine effective translation techniques in addition to back-translation and effective methods in conducting cross-cultural research.

Summary

Although the survey research method is often known as the most widely used method of the social sciences, limited information exists about surveying LEP populations. As the pace of demographic changes in the U.S. population has been accelerating and linguistical and cultural diversity has been intensified, survey research method needs to be expanded to include issues regarding working with LEP populations. May this paper provide some understanding of issues encountered in surveying LEP populations.

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